

Certification of community forestry enterprises: experiences with incorporating community forestry in a global system for forest governance

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Abstract This paper discusses the history and present status of community forest certification as an illustration of the growing interactions between global and local processes in forest governance. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification system is analyzed as an illustrative case of the trend towards increased incorporation of community-based forest enterprises (CFEs) into international initiatives for sustainable forest management and global markets. First the paper reviews the development of community-based forest management and the evolution in certification of community-based forest enterprises. Next it discusses the main challenges and opportunities for making CFE certification accessible and beneficial for communities. Finally it illustrates the importance of multi-level and multi-actor partnerships for creating effective interfaces between global standards and community forestry practices. The experiences with FSC certification of community-based forest enterprises demonstrate that community forestry is enlarging its scope from autonomous decision-making on local practice to incorporation in international forest governance systems. This experience also demonstrates that the application of global standards for sustainable forest management requires adaptation to local

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realities. These lessons are of relevance for further incorporation of community forestry in the newly evolving global programs for forest management and conservation.

Keywords Certification standards · Social strategies · Social capital · Equity

Introduction

Since the 1980s the traditional approach of government-led control over forests and forest policy has been influenced by several trends. Starting in the 1980s, much attention was given towards decentralization of forestry policies, including devolution of forest management responsibility (Arnold 2001; Larson and Soto 2008). Concomitantly, a more substantial role in forest policy for civil society organisations and marketing organisations gradually evolved (Mayers and Bass 1999). Moreover, global processes regarding forest governance increased in importance, notably with respect to the formulation of international standards for good forest governance and sustainable forest management (Humphreys 1999). As a result of these trends, forest governance arrangements are increasingly characterized by their multi-actor and multi-level nature (Agrawal et al. 2008).

The emergence of these novel arrangements for forest governance had important repercussions on the development of community-based forestry. Initially, this development was conceived of as involving a process of decentralization (Ribot et al. 2006). Consequently, during the early phases of community forestry development much attention was focused on empowering local communities to become engaged in forest management as an autonomous practice (Arnold 2001). However, as a result of the emergence of the trend towards multi-actor and multi-level governance arrangements, the status of community forestry gradually changed with more attention being given towards incorporation of community forestry in external governance and marketing systems. A good example of this new trend is the growing interest in certification of community forestry initiatives.

Whereas community forestry may be conceived of as a decentralisation-focused instrument for forest governance, forest certification is often considered as a non-state market-focused instrument for forest governance (Cashore et al. 2004; Agrawal et al. 2008; Auld et al. 2008). In the case of FSC certification, some have focused on its unique multi-sectoral governance structure (Tollefson et al. 2008; Eden 2009). Community forestry and forest certification were originally developed independently, but in the late 1990s they became more strongly linked. The experiences gained with community forestry certification provide an excellent example of the trend towards increased incorporation of community forestry in global initiatives for sustainable forest management (Ros-Tonen 2006). With the advent of newly envisaged global programs for payment of forest environmental services (e.g. water and carbon payments), the incorporation of community forestry in international forestry initiatives and financial markets will become of increasing importance (Wiersum 2009).

This paper assesses the growing incorporation of community forestry in global initiatives, especially international forest certification systems. It discusses the history and present status of community forestry certification as an illustration of the growing interactions between globalization and localization processes in forest governance. It specifically focuses on the learning and adaptation processes that emerged in the process of setting and implementing global standards for community forestry certification. The paper is based on the experiences of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) with the certification of community-based forest enterprises (CFEs). The FSC certification system is reputed for being one of the most inclusive and credible certification programs (Ozinga 2004; Conroy 2008). In the late 1990s FSC initiated the first programs to make certification more accessible for small and community producers, and since that time conscious efforts have been undertaken to adapt their certification standards to the conditions of small, low-intensity, and community producers. Due to the relatively long history of this program, the FSC's experiences with CFE certification offer an excellent opportunity for assessing the challenges involved in the process of embedding community forestry in global systems for forest governance.

The paper is organized as follows. Section “[Evolution in focus of community forestry](#)” sketches the evolution of community forestry in order to better understand the gradual diversification of community forestry from an autonomous activity to a globally-embedded activity. Section “[Development of certification of community-based forest enterprises](#)” describes the development of community forestry certification, followed by a discussion on its challenges and opportunities in Sect. “[Challenges and opportunities for certification of community-based forest enterprises](#)”. Section “[Main efforts to make FSC certification more accessible and beneficial for community forestry enterprises](#)” discusses FSC efforts to adapt its certification system to small, low-intensity, and community forestry operations. Section “[The role of the FSC multi-actor and multi-level governance structure](#)” discusses how the multi-level and multi-actor FSC governance system has been instrumental in the process of effectively embedding CFEs in global forest governance systems, and the last section offers conclusions.

Evolution in focus of community forestry

Since its inception in the 1970s, a gradual evolution has taken place in thinking about the scope of community forestry (Arnold 2001; Charnley and Poe 2007; Larson and Soto 2008). Initially, the view was that forest management regimes should focus on national interests and macro-economic growth, and be supplemented by forest management regimes focusing on basic needs, equity and local participation. The development of community forestry was considered as a means to take the local land use pressure away from valuable forest reserves by combining rehabilitation of ‘wastelands’ with the provision of forest-related basic needs for local communities. For instance, in an early Indian policy the main objective for stimulating community forestry was ‘to meet the needs for forest products for rural people in full from readily accessible community lands, and thereby lighten the

burden on industrial production forestry' (GOI 1976 in Chambers et al. 1989, p. 200). Although the lack of inclusion of high-value forests in community forestry schemes has often been criticized (e.g. Challinor and Frondorf 1991), adaptation of the original focus only happened gradually. In the 1990s, a focus on stimulating socially responsible forest management in more valuable forests gained strength as a result of the global recognition of the human and ancestral rights of indigenous and other groups of forest-dwelling people. Similarly, several global treaties, such as the Convention on Biodiversity Conservation, the ancestral rights of indigenous people to forests, as well as the relevance of their traditional lifestyles and knowledge for forest conservation, were increasingly recognized (Berkes et al. 2000; Colchester 2008). This resulted in a gradual return of forests to the control of indigenous peoples. In contrast to the earlier community forestry initiatives, these forests often had high-value timber production potential. Consequently, community forest management was increasingly perceived as not only a tool for forest conservation and provision of subsistence needs, but also for commercial production of both timber and non-timber forest products (Wollenberg and Ingles 1998). This new paradigm emphasized the importance and challenge of making markets work for forest communities (Sheil and Wunder 2002; Scherr et al. 2003). Present discussions on the development of innovative payment for environmental services (PES) systems, such as the recently proposed REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) concept, have supported this new model. The PES concept explicitly recognizes co-benefits in the form of recognition of the forest rights of indigenous people (Humphreys 2008).

In summary, during the past 40 years several changes took place with respect to the perspectives for stimulating community-based forest management. The focus has gradually expanded from forest conservation and meeting basic needs towards recognizing rights to ancestral lands and to participating in global partnerships for forest governance (Ros-Tonen 2006). Wiersum (2009) distinguished three main changes:

- The perspective of community forestry development involving the creation of a dual forest economy with co-existence of a modern and traditional forest sector changed to a perspective of community forestry involving a gradual incorporation of traditional local systems into the dominant modern sector.
- The perspective of community forestry as basically involving an autonomous local organization with its own decision-making and control abilities evolved to a perspective of a local forestry organization becoming embedded in global and national institutional frameworks for forest-related decision-making and control.
- The perspective of community forestry as basically involving local forest-related needs as well as indigenous knowledge and practices changed to a perspective of local forestry practices addressing national and global forest-related needs and incorporating professional forestry skills for dealing with national and international standards and markets.

Consequently, at the global level four phases in thinking about its scope and institutional setting of community forestry may be distinguished. The *Forest conservation phase* focused on the scope of local communities acting as social

fences around state-controlled forest production and conservation areas. This approach focused mainly on teaching local communities the benefits of engaging in down-scaled professional forest management practices. The *Democratization and empowerment phase* focused on the specific forest-related needs and activities of local communities, as well as the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral forest lands. Attention focused on the role of forests in the livelihood coping strategies of local communities with respect to supplying subsistence needs, as well as providing safety nets in case of socio-economic emergencies. Moreover, the need for effective processes of community-level decision-making and control over forest resources was emphasized, notably in the form of common-property resource management. The *Joint and collaborative forest management phase* focused on national-level cooperation and benefit-sharing between state forest management organizations and local communities. Attention focused on the adaptation of professional forest management regimes by incorporating community participation as a means to contribute to the dual objectives of rehabilitation of degraded forests and poverty alleviation. Also the importance of interactive decision-making between local communities and professional forestry organizations received increasing attention. The *Incorporation of community forestry in globalizing economy networks phase* focused on the potential of community forestry to contribute to poverty alleviation and income earning. This was to be accomplished by stimulating community-based forest enterprise (CFE) development and assisting communities to operate in national and international markets for commercial forest products and environmental services.

The trends in community-based forest management are not evolving in all regions at the same rate. Depending on local socio-cultural and economic conditions, the actual institutional arrangements for community forestry may reflect different phases in thinking. Even though in many countries the last phase is gaining importance (e.g. see Benneker 2008; Ezzine de Bas et al. 2009), this does not mean that the early phases are no longer of relevance. Nonetheless, the increasing incorporation of community forestry in external trading networks is reflected in the increasing emergence of community-based forest enterprises (CFEs) which combine community-based forest management and commercial trade of forest products. This increased engagement of more commercially-focused CFEs in markets has most strongly evolved in Latin America and parts of Asia in areas with strong community tenure (Sunderlin et al. 2008). The commercial orientation may not only involve national markets, but also international markets. In order to operate in the international markets, there is a growing need for community forestry to adhere to (inter)national standards for sustainable management and product quality. The growing interest in certification of CFEs forms an important example of this trend.

Development of certification of community-based forest enterprises

The development of international ecological, social, and economic criteria for sustainable forest management was initiated in the 1980s as a result of great dissatisfaction about the contribution of timber logging to tropical deforestation

(Bass 2004). Within the framework of the International Tropical Timber Agreement, for the first time in history an international marketing agreement including provisions on the need for ecologically responsible production processes was formulated. Subsequently, the International Tropical Timber Organisation identified a set of criteria for sustainable forest management. When this intergovernmental process did not result in concrete operational programs, the initiative to develop a system for forest management certification was taken over by a group of environmental and social non-governmental organisations and conscientious timber retail businesses. In 1989, the NGO Rainforest Alliance set up the Smart Wood forest certification program. This program was subsequently affiliated to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification program, which was founded in 1993 as one of the first alliances between NGOs and businesses (Bass 2004; Cashore et al. 2006).

The FSC certification program, and its underlying multi-stakeholder governance system for standard setting and control, is widely regarded as the most advanced example of how to formulate and implement a global system for quality control on forest management (Ozinga 2004; Tollefson et al. 2008; Eden 2009). The FSC developed the Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship in 1994. These international guidelines are interpreted at the national level in the form of national certification standards. Initial certification efforts focused on industrial timber production operations and did not consider the specific features of small-scale or community-based forestry schemes (Irvine 1999; Thornber and Markopoulos 2000; Markopoulos 2003; Molnar 2003, 2004; Butterfield et al. 2005). Consequently, in the mid 1990s only a handful of community-based forestry enterprises were certified in Mexico and Honduras (Donovan 2000). However, at the end of the 1990s, the FSC, as well as community development and conservation organisations, started to give attention to the potential for small-scale and community forestry certification.

The focus on community forestry initiatives was initially driven by social and ethical commitments regarding equity in distribution of certification benefits among various categories of producers (Donovan 2000; Thornber 2003) and to increasing the contribution of certification to sustainable rural livelihoods (Stewart et al. 2003). The view was the FSC certification system should not be restricted to the established large-scale commercial forests enterprises, but should be accessible for the growing number of small-scale, community and indigenous forestry enterprises (Higman and Nussbaum 2002; Scherr and Kaimowitz 2003). This view was also supported by the fact that communities and small producers were gaining control of substantial forest resources around the world. Within tropical countries it is estimated that about 23% of the forest area is under ownership of or designated for use by communities and indigenous groups (Sunderlin et al. 2008). The growing importance of community-controlled forests is demonstrated by the increase in area of these forests from 346 M ha in 2002 to around 4,334 M ha in 2008 (Sunderlin et al. 2008). In order to increase the participation of this category of forest enterprises in the FSC system, as well as to comply with requests of retailers interested in marketing community forestry based timber, it was essential to give specific attention to this category of forest enterprises.

Area and regional location

As a result the conscious efforts to stimulate community forestry certification (described in Sect. “[Main efforts to make FSC certification more accessible and beneficial for community forestry enterprises](#)”), the number of certified CFEs has gradually increased. Twenty three CFEs had been FSC certified by November 1999 ([Irvine 1999](#)), 51 by August 2001 ([Molnar 2003](#)), 113 by March 2006 ([Humphries and Kainer 2006](#)), and 125 by November 2009 ([FSC 2010](#)). However, the number of certified enterprises and area of certified community forests is still relatively low. This is demonstrated by the situation in tropical countries. In 2010, CFEs formed 10.5% of all FSC certified forest management operations, but the area represented only 5.3% of all certified forest areas ([FSC 2010](#)). This area represented only 1% of the total area of community forest land in the tropics as reported by Sunderlin et al. ([2008](#)). In tropical countries, the average area of the certified community forests was just over 50,000 ha in contrast to an average area of 143,000 ha for other certified forests; this reflects the relatively small-scale of these forests ([FSC 2010](#)).

The certified CFEs are not equally distributed over the tropics (Table 1): around 80% of the number and area of certified CFEs is located in Latin America ([FSC 2010](#)). This reflects the fact that about 60% of all community forests are situated in Latin America ([Sunderlin et al. 2008](#)), where community forestry development is strongly related to land reform policies for returning ancestral land rights to indigenous people or to local communities. Within this political context, concentrated efforts to stimulate CFE certification have been undertaken in several countries, notably Mexico (e.g. [Gerez-Fernández and Alatorre-Guzmán 2005](#); [Fonseca 2006](#)) and Brazil ([Humphries and Kainer 2006](#)). CFE certification is less developed in Asia and Africa, where the total area is only 600,000 ha compared to about 3500,000 ha in Latin America ([FSC 2010](#)).

Challenges and opportunities for certification of community-based forest enterprises

Since the first CFEs obtained FSC certification in the mid 1990s, much has been learned about the impacts and challenges of community certification. Community-based forest enterprises not only face challenges related to community forestry in general, many of which are related to the historic development of community

Table 1 Regional distribution of FSC certified community-based forest enterprises in the tropics

Source: FSC Certificate Holder Database, March 2010 ([FSC 2010](#))

	Total area (1,000 ha)	No. of certified CFEs
Africa	196.5	8
Asia and Pacific	413.7	16
Latin America	3499.8	117

forestry described earlier, but also additional challenges related to certification specifically. In many cases the original assumptions and expectations differed from the actual experiences (Table 2). Two main sets of challenges can be identified (Thornber and Markopoulos 2000): fulfilling and maintaining the requirements for certification, and obtaining local benefits from certification.

During the initial phase of its development, community forest management was often relegated to degraded and low-value forest lands, and usually focused on meeting local needs. These conditions made it challenging for communities to become incorporated into global markets for certified products. Moreover, the original standards for certification were designed for commercial forest estates, and were not always applicable to the often smaller and less intensively managed CFEs. As a result, transaction costs for certification were relatively high for CFEs. In most cases certification has only been possible due to financial assistance by donor organisations (Thornber and Markopoulos 2000; Molnar 2003; De Pourcq et al. 2009). Even when certified, many local communities have had difficulty to maintain their certification status, or have chosen not to renew it. This is illustrated by the relatively large number of certified enterprises suspended or decertified; at the end of 2009 47% of the earlier certifications were decertified and 6% of the earlier certifications were suspended (FSC database). One of the reasons for this decertification is that compliance with the standards was too difficult for the CFEs to maintain after the initial assistance of donors had stopped.

The relatively high rate of decertification may also be caused by the fact that local communities considered the benefits of certification insufficient to maintain or renew certification (FSC certificates require annual audits and renewal every 5 years). As certification is often perceived as a market-based tool for stimulating responsible forest management, many programs to support community forest certification assumed certification would provide better market access and price premiums.¹ However, a number of studies have demonstrated that, especially among early adopters of certification, the benefits often did not meet expectations. Reasons for this include the costs for accessing high value timber markets were often quite high and reluctance of buyers to pay price premiums (Markopoulos 2003; De Pourcq et al. 2009; Crow and Danks 2010).

Notwithstanding these challenges, several communities did profit from certification, e.g. in the form of price premiums (Humphries and Kainer 2006). Moreover, several certified CFEs have indicated they believed non-financial benefits made certification worthwhile. In many cases, certified communities perceived that certification provided them national and even international public recognition as responsible forest stewards able to fulfill international forestry certification standards (Thornber and Markopoulos 2000; Klooster 2004; Humphries and Kainer 2006; Crow and Danks 2010). In such cases certification was credited with enhancing the professional status and prestige of the community enterprise, as demonstrated by increased frequency of interaction with external organizations.

¹ Few of these programs actually implemented market studies or developed business plans for the community enterprises.

Table 2 Main differences between assumed and actual experienced results of certification of community forestry enterprises (CFE) from literature review

Main expected/ascribed benefits of CFE certification	Main experiences with CFE certification
Certification results in price premiums	Certified CFEs do not always obtain price premiums CFEs experience many difficulties to access high-value niche markets, especially ones in developed countries International markets have strict requirements for product quality, regular supply, and competitive pricing Direct and indirect costs for certification may exceed returns
Certification allows improved market access and/or share	It can be very difficult for CFEs to enter and compete in certified wood markets CFEs have more success accessing certified markets when there are local certified buyers
Certification enables indigenous groups to be recognized as legitimate forest owners and users	Certification may be used as a tool by indigenous people to gain legal forest ownership rights rather than as a means to access high-quality timber markets Little attention is given in certification of indigenous forest enterprises to the fate of migrant people who settled in the area
Certification can contribute to strengthening community organisation and institutions	Certification standards are often incompatible with locally developed management practices and customary laws Certification requires high levels of technical expertise in both managing forests and forest enterprises, and dealing with certification bodies. This may result in socio-economic stratification and specialization, lack of internalisation of certification requirements within community organisations, and even elite capture of certification benefits Certification of CFEs is often not possible without support from development organisations, especially with the certification process and product sales CFEs face the risk of donor dependence, may be subject to additional donor standards (e.g., regarding gender issues), and risk negative impacts of withdrawal of donors acting as temporary facilitators
Unexpected benefits	Certification may be perceived as a 'price' for being able to meet international requirements rather than as a tool for sustainable forest management Workers operate under safer conditions due to required use of personal safety equipment Public recognition through the local, national, and international media Greater political power due to public recognition

Based on Thorner and Markopoulos (2000), Molnar (2003), Humphries and Kainer (2006), De Pourcq et al. (2009), Crow and Danks (2010)

Hence, certification was not just conceived as a tool for increasing financial assets, but also for increasing social assets and helping the communities become recognized partners in global forest governance systems.

Main efforts to make FSC certification more accessible and beneficial for community forestry enterprises

As a result of the experiences gained since the initial certifications of CFEs, the original assumption of the 1980s that certification should be based on one set of standards (Bass 2004) became modified. It was recognized that the specific nature and characteristics of community and small-scale forestry enterprises required an adapted certification process and adjusted standards (Stewart et al. 2003). Although this paper focuses on FSC certification of community forestry operations, it is important to note that the FSC's efforts to adapt its certification system for other types of producers has targeted mainly small and low-intensity managed forests (SLIMFs) with the assumption that most community forestry operations will qualify as SLIMFs. The FSC is currently working on several fronts to make certification more accessible and beneficial for SLIMFs and communities (FSC 2003, 2007). Two main developments to date are adjustments to the certification process and to certification standards (Tables 3, 4). Other efforts focus on increasing the market benefits for certified SLIMFs and CFEs.

The first adjustment in certification in view of the specific conditions of small-scale forest management was the introduction of group certification in 1998. Group certification allows forest managers to obtain certification collectively. By sharing administrative and reporting requirements, achieving certification becomes more cost effective and less time consuming for group members. As such, group certification can help community and small forest operations to access certification.

To further open niches for small and community forest producers, FSC formulated in 2001 a Social Strategy to better serve the needs of local community forest users, indigenous peoples, and small and low intensity managed forests (FSC

Table 3 Main developments in adjusting the FSC certification system to small or low-intensity managed forest and/or community forestry conditions

Main consideration	Basic approach	Adjusted standard
Same standards for all forest management enterprises, but streamlined procedures for small or low-intensity managed forests (SLIMFs)	Decrease transaction costs for communities and smallholders	Standards for group certification Streamlined procedures for SLIMFs Modular approach to certification under development
Adjust standards to specific nature of SLIMFs and/or community-based forest enterprises (CFEs)	National standards based on the FSC's Principles and Criteria for Responsible Forest Management with attention to specific conditions of SLIMFs and/or CFEs	Special indicators in national standards for SLIMFs National standards specifically for SLIMF and/or CFEs

Table 4 FSC National Standards

National standards that include indicators for small or low-intensity managed forests (SLIMFs)	Bolivia Brazil Canada (Boreal forest region) Chile Czech Republic Denmark Finland Germany Luxembourg Mexico Papua New Guinea Portugal Spain Sweden
National standards specifically for SLIMF and/or community-based forest enterprises (CFEs)	Bolivia (specifically for SLIMF-Brazil Nut production) Brazil (SLIMF and CFE) Cameroon (CFE) Canada (SLIMF, Maritime forest region) Colombia (specifically for SLIMF-Bamboo production) Peru (specifically for SLIMF-Brazil Nuts production)
National standards that do not include indicators for SLIMFs (and are in process of revision to include these)	Canada (British Columbia region) Colombia Netherlands Peru Russia United Kingdom United States

2003). The Social Strategy identified the need to improve access to forest certification by streamlining procedures and lowering certification costs.

As an outcome of this strategy, FSC introduced in 2003 the Small and Low Intensity Management Forest (SLIMF) Initiative (FSC 2007). The goal of this initiative was to find and implement practical solutions to the barriers faced by small, low intensity, and/or non-timber forest product operations in accessing and retaining FSC forest certification. It includes SLIMF eligibility guidelines and streamlined procedures for certification. The initiative also stimulated the development of SLIMF indicators in FSC national standards (which is a requirement for all national standards), as well as the development of national standards specifically for SLIMFs (Table 4). In 2008, FSC conducted an evaluation of the SLIMF initiative (Perez and Arboleda 2008). Results showed the costs of certification had been reduced and the certification process was faster. However, the review also

revealed the standards needed to be further simplified, and auditors needed to be trained to perform SLIMF certification assessments.

The discussion on specific requirements for community forestry certification was further stimulated by the FSC-initiated Lisbon Process, which brought smallholders and community forestry practitioners and experts from around the world together to consider options for further improvements. The initial meeting in 2008 highlighted the need for more and better informational materials for SLIMF and community producers. This led the FSC to implement a variety of additional activities to make certification more accessible and beneficial for SLIMF and community producers.

Currently, the FSC is working on two new initiatives to make certification more beneficial for certified community and small enterprises: a new label option for products from small and community producers, and a pilot project for dual labeling for FSC and Fairtrade certified products. The new label option will identify products that contain material from certified small and community producers around the globe.² The dual labeling pilot project is a joint effort of the FSC and the Fairtrade International. It is being tested with producers in developing countries, and is scheduled to run until the end of 2013. These two initiatives aim to attract new buyers for small and community enterprises, and to help them negotiate better prices.

The role of the FSC multi-actor and multi-level governance structure

The process of gradual evolution in the standards and certification procedures was greatly enhanced by the FSC governance system. The governance system is characterized by its unique multi-chamber membership structure. FSC members are divided into three chambers with equal voting weight: social, environmental, and economic. This membership structure occurs at the national and international levels. This structure not only provides ‘hybrid strength’ (Eden 2009), but also stimulates active involvement of a variety of conservation, development and business organizations in the national and international standard setting and certification processes (Tollefson et al. 2008). Notably the platform of the social chamber provides space for advocacy and focused discussions on social dimensions of sustainable forest management. Initiatives such as the Lisbon process (see above) provide a good basis for members to identify novel approaches towards stimulating access of CFEs to certification.

The FSC International Center works with a large network of national offices, national contact people, and focal points. The national network members enable the incorporation of country specific experiences in the FSC governance system and the translation of the global FSC certification guidelines into national standards. Currently FSC national standards exist in 20 countries, and six of these countries have standards specifically for small-scale and/or community forestry operations (Table 4).

² The new label option uses the same standard FSC label, but has new label text that identifies the product as from a well managed forest of small or community producers.

The role of FSC member organizations

FSC's multi-actor governance system also provides a strong basis for gaining experience with community forestry certification. As indicated above community forestry certification would normally not have been possible without external support. Almost all community forestry certification initiatives were initiated by different FSC member organizations active in the field of conservation and development. This active involvement of different donor organizations in stimulating community forestry certification provided an important learning platform. Initially, these externally-initiated efforts often focused on training local communities in dealing with the requirements of sustainable forest management and certification, and paying (most of) the costs involved with the certification process (Thornber and Markopoulos 2000; Molnar 2003). In several cases development NGOs also added their own social standards on community organisation and gender concerns to the CFE development process (De Koning 2011). This interest in additional social standards was reflected in studies on options for combined FSC—Fairtrade certification (Taylor 2005; McQueen et al. 2008). The results of these studies stimulated dual FSC-Fairtrade certification pilot project mentioned above.

Gradually, it became recognized that the financial and organizational support of development organizations to CFE certification may not contribute to sustainable commercial decision-making by the communities themselves (cf Crow and Danks 2010). Consequently, some development organizations started to stimulate commercial enterprises to form partnerships with local forest enterprises and to play a greater role of these enterprises in arranging community forest certification (De Pourcq et al. 2009). As a result, the original bilateral partnerships between communities and NGOs are gradually changing into tripartite partnerships including also commercial timber enterprises (c.f. Ros-Tonen 2006). This demonstrates the evolution in governance assemblages (Murray Li 2007) for CFE certification. However, this approach is open to debate. Retailer involvement in community forest certification has been challenged on the basis that retailers often have a negative view of smallholder and community forestry as involving low production capacity and poor processing technology, and that retailers tend not to compensate the costs for certification (Klooster 2005).

Another innovation pioneered by some donor organizations is an experiment whether it is possible to further extend the multi-actor and multi-level standard identification and adaptation process to community level. Experiments in Nepal showed that under the conditions of well-established organizational structures for community-forestry, local people are able to adapt the generic standards for certification to local conditions and norms guiding community forestry (Shrestha and Khanal 2004; Wiersum and Shrestha 2010). The tendency of these early experiments is that local standards focus more strongly on benefit-sharing and governance-related aspects than the official standards do. These experiences reflect the earlier mentioned experiences that CFE certification is locally often used as a tool for identity creation and increased social capital rather than only for creating financial assets and income generation.

Conclusion

During the past three decades the meaning and scope of community forestry has gradually evolved. The experiences with community forest certification illustrate how the scope of community forestry has gradually broadened. Several of the original notions on the nature and development scope of community forestry have been amended during the process of developing community forest certification. Community forestry should not only be considered as involving traditional approaches towards using and managing forests by local communities and indigenous peoples, mainly for subsistence and socio-cultural livelihood needs, but also as involving commercial forest use. From an equity point-of-view, community access to commercial markets is essential (Donovan 2000; Stewart et al. 2003; Thornber 2003), but this requires compliance with modern standards for accountability in marketing chains.

The importance of community-based forest enterprises has increased as communities have gained autonomy over their forests and shifted their focus from subsistence to commercial production. This has resulted in an increasing embeddedness in external forest policy schemes such as FSC certification. However, communities face challenges to accessing and benefiting from certification—not all of which are linked directly to certification (e.g., tenure, bureaucracy, markets carrying cheaper illegal timber products). To facilitate the equitable access of CFEs to certification, the original certification process and standards are being further adapted to the realities of community and small forestry enterprises. Innovative marketing opportunities to increase the benefits of certification for these enterprises are also being developed. Continued experiments will show if these efforts can make certification a more viable and beneficial tool for recognizing responsible community-based forest management.

These developments were greatly facilitated by the FSC governance system with a multi-level and multi-actor structure. The presence of a social chamber at the national and international levels with active membership of development organisations has served as a platform for discussing needs and options for adapting certification standards to community forestry conditions. It also served as a learning platform about the experiences of FSC member organizations in stimulating CFE certification and experimenting with novel approaches. The evolution in CFE certification illustrates how the original notion of certification as a standard setting and control system gradually evolved in the notion of certification as a forest governance system (c.f. Rickenbach and Overdevest 2006). In this newly evolving interpretation, standard setting is not considered as a ‘once and for all’ activity negotiated at international level, but rather as a continuing process of negotiation and social learning between multi-level stakeholders with increasing attention to developing country and management system specific standards.

In conclusion, the experiences with certification of community forestry enterprises have a twofold significance. First, as community forestry gradually evolved and increasingly includes community-based forest enterprises engaged in commercial operations, international initiatives such as certification can help them gain recognition in both markets and in political and social settings, and hence

become effectively embedded in global networks. Second, for these enterprises to fit into global systems that were originally envisaged for industrial operations, adaptations are needed as far as the standards and procedures. The FSC governance structure, especially the Social Chamber members and the national standards development groups, has been an important asset in the social learning process of how best to adapt FSC certification for small-scale and community producers. However, even with several efforts specifically targeting these producers, they still face many challenges accessing and benefiting from certification, indicating the need for continued adaptation. These lessons are of relevance to newly evolving international forest programs involving global standardization of forest management, such as Europe's FLEGT (Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade) Action Plan for stimulating timber legality, and the REDD (Reduction of Deforestation and Forest Degradation) program for stimulating carbon sequestration and climate payments.

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